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Whose Voice the Waters Heard:

A Short Story Cycle



Honors Thesis

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Department: English

Advisor: Joseph Pici, M.A.

April 2017

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Abstract

In this collection of short stories, each short story is a unique exploration of the powerful and often enigmatic concept of loss. The common unity for the collection presents itself in two parts: place and theme. Characters of all ages, from all walks of life, go to the river to have their voices heard and to grieve a particular form of loss. The collection takes a dynamic and expansive view on loss, and each short story reflects a different idea or experience of loss. It seeks to examine not only what can be lost, but also what can and cannot be found. Some losses explored include: loss of life, control, direction and sanity. While each story takes place around a different river and examines a different form of loss, the image of the river embodies the collection, as a river is both a thing in itself and a part of something much greater.

Disclaimer

This collection can be thought of as a first edition of *Whose Voice the Waters Heard*. Significant additions, deletions and alterations are to be expected in the ongoing revision process of this short story collection.

Dedication or Acknowledgements

To the entire English Department at the University of Dayton

To Ninny and Pop Joe— and that porch from where I first saw the magic of rivers



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RIVER LADY

[SANITY]

If there ever is a time to be a sunflower over a daisy, it's in wartime. Sunflowers and daisies are not the same. Daisies are flimsy and meek. Sunflowers are beautiful and strong. They can stand while shaking and they always seek the sun. On a grey morning in 1940, the clouds parted for a moment and a single seed fell from the sky. From the dark, rich soil, a girl began to sprout. They called her Daisy, though she was anything but. Decades passed by, each one watering and growing Daisy, each one making an even stronger case for her sunflowerness. Yes, Daisy was a sunflower, but her grandson was not.

Renny, a young artist who was inspired and afraid of the world all at the same time, had a week before he shipped off to Al Kharj, Saudi Arabia. Three months ago, in a moment of courage or stupidity—he couldn't tell—he enlisted in the Army [start paragraph 2 with that]. Before he left for sandier pastures, he stopped by his grandmother's house in the low country. As usual, she was out in the garden. He walked over to the shed, grabbed a pair of gloves and a spade, and knelt down next to Daisy. She was Daisy to everyone, even her grandchildren. If she couldn't be Sunflower, she sure as hell wasn't going to be Grandma.

"These zinnias are looking good, Daisy," Renny said, pulling up stray weeds.

"I've been given 'em plenty of TLC," Daisy said, sprinkling the row with her tin watering can. "But that flower talk can always wait. You've got some things of your own growing on the horizon, oui?"

“Right. I ship out next week. Tuesday at eight o’clock.” “0800,” he added a second later.

“I get, even respect, that you’re a soldier now. I did a stint in protestland back in the ‘60s, but I’m a bit less intense with the whole hippie-dippie thing.”

Renny looked up from his work and smiled at Daisy. Daisy was gardening in her bare feet. She wore a floral bohemian skirt and an untucked denim shirt with seed packs nestled in her rolled-up sleeves like a pack of Marlboros. Her silky white hair hung in wild curls that couldn’t be contained, so she didn’t try. If this was Daisy abandoning hippiedom, Renny had no idea what a 1967 Polaroid of his grandmother would have shown.

“Whatever you say, Daiz.”

“Hey, now listen to me. I’ve got a few things to say, okay?”

“Yeah, shoot.”

Daisy set down her watering can, as if the moment was the only thing she could hold.

“Love, you’re going to be entering a whole different world. Years ago, I didn’t respect that world, but now I do. I know what that world does for us.”

She reached out for Renny’s hands, her dirt filled fingers running over his knuckles. Her thumb stroked the back of his hand, urging the current on.

“But darling, don’t listen to all that macho, machismo, anti-nature bullshit they may try to push on you. Remember, you’ll be wearing camo— and those are Nature’s colors. Out there, you’ll be part of Her. So you don’t have to harden a heart to have a hero’s heart. Be a sunflower.”

“Daisy, I—”

“Now I didn’t say go be a daisy. A *sunflower*, you dig? When you’re out there, look around you. The mountains. The sandy soil. The grubs and the grass. Notice the way the wildflowers grow. It’s beautiful shit. It’s shit because it’s chaotic and messed up and vulnerable, but goddamn that is some solid, beautiful shit.”

“Look for the goddamn beautiful shit. Noted.”

“Hang in there. I’m almost done... If you don’t feel, you go numb. Seek the sun, the feeling. If you come back and I find you left part of your sunflower soul out there, I’ll kick your ass. I mean it. Now go grab a few more bags of topsoil so we can prep the next row. Better dirt under your nails than under your soul.”

Daisy watched her grandson move across the lawn, thankful her wide brim straw hat hid her welling eyes. Renny never told his grandmother that he was a daisy, but she knew. And it scared her. She dug at the same hole, watching him, and dug deeper and deeper. She buried the seed and her emotions. Once Renny was in the shed, Daisy leaned towards the earth and whispered to the soil.

“What the hell do they want with a daisy?”

She watered the seed and it gurgled something in reply. Daisy moved along the row, planting, whispering, watering, asking each seed the same question.

During the eight months of Renny’s deployment, Daisy went mad in the most beautiful way. She rose with the sun each morning, its rays tickling her awake with their heat. Within a matter of days, the routine was embedded in her muscle memory. Slip on skirt. Pull on shirt. Lace up Converse. Brew tea. Drink tea. Bike to the river.

Daisy infinitely preferred biking to walking. Walking gave her too much alone time with her thoughts and worries. Biking was her therapy. She'd hop on her beat up Schwinn and focus on the little things. The hum of her tires kissing the dirt road. The little squeak of her front basket. The gentle swaying of the mossy oaks. The salty marsh air. The road was for little thoughts. The river was for big thoughts.

She went to the river to pray and talk to whoever and whatever would listen. For Daisy, religion was love lived. Loving people and loving Nature was her form of prayer. And she prayed to the river the most. Her prayers were a yin-yang of heartbreak and happiness.

Each morning she would dance along the shore. With each spin, her hair became wilder. All of a sudden, when she felt It, she would freeze her dance and her daring kind eyes would turn to the water as if by a strange magnetic force. She would smile, rise playfully onto her toes and tip toe into the river. As she waded in, her floral skirt would always rise up around her like a cloud. It was on this floral cloud that she would continue her dance. Daisy would twist and turn, going with and against the current, windmilling her arms, splashing up crystals of water and smiling and praying and crying and remembering and hoping. She felt safe in the river. The river took her tears and mixed them with the water. At the end of her dance, Daisy never felt sad. She couldn't see her tears. And to see sadness was to believe in sadness.

One morning, Daisy woke up long past dawn. The sun's warm arms forgot to gently rock her awake. Instead, she awoke to a cool breeze and goose bumps. She rolled over and looked out her bay window. The sky was beautifully painted with melancholy

strokes of indigo grey. Per her morning routine, she slipped on her skirt and pulled on her shirt. But the sun's absence messed with Daisy's rhythm and she forgot about her Converse. After a cup of tea, she popped on her bike like she always does.

As she pedaled, she watched the gentle swaying of the mossy oaks and smelled the salty marsh air and listened to the hum of her tires kissing the dirt road and to a soft clanging and rolling coming from her basket.

Without her shoes, her feet hurt as the hard plastic pedals pressed into her soles. Each pump of her legs stamped and restamped the pedal design into her feet. By the time she reached the river, her right foot had cut open slightly. She dismounted from her bike and stepped on something oddly cold and silky. One hand balancing on her Schwinn, she inspected her foot and saw she had stepped on a white daisy—now a red and white daisy. She gently pulled the petals from her sticky foot then turned to the river and smiled. She kept like this—smiling and staring at the river—as she reached into her basket.

As she tied her gardening waist apron higher than normal.

As she filled the apron with the cans of spray paint.

As she began her hobbled dance along the shore.

As she waded in, like she always did.

On this day, though, Daisy had a specific destination in mind. Her dance ended right below the bridge that arched over the river. She floated on her floral skirted cloud to the bridge's shoreside pillar. After saying a silent prayer of gratitude to the river for her low tide, she began her artwork. Her hands moved gently, reverently, in long sweeping strokes. Sometimes her eyes were open. Sometimes they weren't. If she felt something

she didn't want to feel, she would look down at the river and smile. Sometimes the smile lasted a while. Sometimes it didn't.

After an hour of painting, thinking, praying and talking to the river, she was done. She tossed her apron on the shore before she swam to the middle of the river where the depth was the greatest. Where she felt weightless.

Her feet slowly danced to keep her afloat. From this dancing cloud she admired her work. Right above the low tide line she painted a rifle, like the ones she saw the National Guard carry in the '60s, with a single flower coming out of the barrel. What flower it was, it was hard to tell. Some said it looked like a daisy. Or a white sunflower, if they existed. Either way, the river heard her prayer. Eventually Daisy swam to shore. She danced to her bike, wrung out her skirt and road home, listening to the hum of her tires, knowing that the river would water the flower, no matter what it was.

TEA WITH QUEEN VICTORIA

It came like flint sparks. Memories, glowing embers, flashed, then violently retreated into the dark suburban night. Her mind worked harder, striking the flint faster and faster. Think. Strike. Think. Strike. One more squeeze of her eyes, one more strike, and she was there. She shifted her weight, her shins stamped with the shag carpet.

“Sit up.” She straightened up and now propped her elbows up on a polished oak table.

“Victoria, pass the tea.”

“Queen Victoria.”

“Queen Victoria, pass the tea.”

Victoria smoothed her blue beaded chiffon gown. A tiger stripe filter—orange and black— began to surround the scene as it faded into warm hues. Strike. She neatly tugged on her blue t-shirt and smoothed the image of the poisoned dart frog. Crumpets shapeshifted into Play-Doh. Lace doilies into paper towels. The two ladies raised their porcelain teacups in a toast.

“To all things lovely.”

“To all things lovely.”

Their cups cheersed not with a high-pitched clink but with a hollow tuhwap. They brought the plastic teacups to their lips and drank the tea that was not there.

The orange glow shrank into little crackles of light, and blinding blackness overtook the fading image, waking her with a start. She shuffled towards the kitchen. Her groping hand traced the house’s shadowy outlines. Wall, doorway, banister, wall.

Freezing tile. Three squares forward, two to the right. She opened the cabinet. Her hand slowly waltzed over porcelain teacups, feeling the cold china until her fingers stopped over one lone plastic pink teacup.

“Tomorrow,” she whispered, choosing the porcelain cup to the left. She nudged the plastic cup a little closer to the front. Two tiles over to the faucet. Two back to the stove. A box step. Moonbeams shone on the rusty kettle. As she turned the burner knob, the range let off a spark before igniting. She smiled and something rolled down her cheek that was not a tear. Reversing her dance, she reopened the cabinet and pulled down the pink teacup.

“Today,” she whispered, setting down the cup with a clink.

HAROLD

[CONTROL]

Harold, still warm from his steamy shower, sat on his bed completely naked. One of his favorite noises, aside from Livy's gentle voice, was the soft crunching of down feathers. A lesser woman would have harangued him for making a butt-sized crater in a freshly fluffed duvet, but Livy was not a lesser woman.

Livy emerged from their bathroom, gingerly tying her silk robe as to not completely coat it in hand cream. She leaned against the doorway as she rubbed in the rest of her lotion, moving and wringing her hands the same way she did when she worried. She shut her eyes as she cupped her hands to her nose, inhaling the honeysuckle scent of her girlhood. Then she opened her eyes and looked at Harold the same way she did on that June evening so many years ago.

"Ready?" she asked, clapping her hands together.

"Ready," Harold replied, pushing himself up and off the bed, pausing to listen to the down feathers take off in crackly flight.

Harold rifled through his top drawer, finding a pair of socks and underwear. He propped himself up against the long farmhouse window, gripping the windowsill, his back cool against the November glass.

"Point."

"He lifted his right foot, gripped the windowsill a little tighter, and pointed his toes. Livy had bunched up the sock and in one swift movement, brought the sock over

Harold's foot. They repeated the same process on the left foot, though Harold could never point that foot quite as well.

"You would have made a terrible ballerina," Livy laughed.

"Yes, thankfully my job requires minimal pirouettes," Harold smiled, raising onto his toes in a borre, moving across the squeaky floorboards, naked, save for his socks.

"Alright Rudolf Nureyev, bravo. Now time for a costume change," Livy said, throwing Harold his boxers.

He then stepped into his slacks, a hand lightly cupping Livy's shoulder. Livy reached out to help him with the zipper, but he put up his index finger in reply. After a few unsuccessful tugs, he pulled the zipper up. Harold then traced the button with a shaky finger. He sighed and looked at Livy standing by, only her bitten lip betraying her peaceful vigil.

"OK," he relucted. At his smile, Livy freed her lip and fastened Harold's slacks.

Half naked, Harold took in Livy's petite form crossing the room, her silk robe gently swaying as she, on tiptoes, rifled through Harold's closet for a shirt.

"Hmm which one?" she murmured, shooting Harold the brightest of smiles, for all that hung in Harold's closet were fourteen white oxfords, the only shirt he ever bought.

"The white one," he said, his voice muffled as he pulled on an undershirt.

Even when his hands started to shake more than was acceptable for a 60-year-old, he never stopped wearing his trademark white, button-up oxfords. Buttoning them was an ordeal, but at this point in his life, consumed by the mundane everydayness of things, Harold looked forward to any ordeal. So he wore the oxford.

Harold rolled his chair to the middle of the classroom and settled in, his lapful of papers giving a little sigh as the chair gave a bit. He would never be a podium professor. Too stiff. His students patiently waited as he shuffled through his coffee stained notes. Once he grabbed the proper handout and examined it, the dried coffee crunched under his thick grip. Harold's class materials, like most things he owned, were stained by coffee. He reached toward his right foot, groping for the mug he had placed down earlier, but his fingers only played upon an invisible piano. Pressing down on the plastic lever, Harold lowered his chair with a comical jolt, his knuckles just missing his coffee cup. His students just smiled. They loved him.

He fished the coffee mug up and rested it on his papers. The mug was faded, the logo of his high school alma mater nothing more than a whisper, a shadow of a design. Students in the back row saw only a plain white mug. Students in the front row saw that coffee stains were a permanent design, making up for the original fading one. Any professor could have coffee stains on the inside of their cup, but Harold—as he was called by faculty and students alike—had coffee stains on the outside, as his hands made for stormy seas. Now, he was sensitive to caffeine anyways—always quick to get jumpy—maybe that was the anxiety too—but his Parkinson's always brought a tempest to his coffee cup seas.

“Imagine,” he told his class, “how wired I'd be if all this coffee actually went in my mouth.”

His class laughed. They loved him.

“Alright folks, let's dig in. You know I can't pass up an alliterative opportunity. We covered Shelley on 'Mont Blanc' Monday, examining the 'universe of things' and

this idea of negative capability. And today is, drumroll please, Wordsworth Wednesday. Wordsworth is in cahoots with Shelley, both poets exploring this really inexpressible idea of the sublime. Both gentlemen believe reality to be a product of the interaction between human consciousness and the world of things. OK, I see your faces. Doesn't make sense? Hold onto your hats and let's see if we can break this all down. Crack open your books to his preface to *Lyrical Ballads*. Are you all there? OK, now if there's anything to take away from Mr. Wordsworth, it's that all good poetry is the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings. Emotion gives importance to actions and situations, not the other way around."

He paused to take a sip of coffee. In an unsuccessful change up in his coffee holding hand and his paper holding hand, a slosh of coffee landed on Harold's shirt. He didn't bother to dab his stains anymore. Livy always kept a jug of bleach above the washer.

"You see," he started, "the Romantics wore their heart of their sleeves, while I apparently wear coffee on mine."

His class laughed. They loved him.

Everyday at four o'clock, at the end of his office hours, Harold would pack up his briefcase and head to his car—all while talking to a student. While other professors' offices saw only a trickle of foot traffic, Harold's saw a constant pouring, a waterfall. Students stopped by to ask questions or, as was more often the case, to listen to Harold get swept away as his stories or lessons took him far away from Office 230.

But always at four o'clock, he'd push off from the desk he was perched on—he wasn't a behind-the-desk kind of professor. Too stiff. In his white shirt he'd gather white papers with brown splotches and open a brown wooden door, walk down a white tiled hall into the early evening light. He'd part ways with the student, then walk towards Hadley, his white '87 Grand Wagoneer with a strip of brown wood, that patiently waited eight hours between two white lines.

Taking the highway, Harold's commute was ten minutes. But Harold never took the highway, with its fast cars, angry drivers and sceneless views. Harold and Hadley preferred rambling country lanes, the poorly maintained ones with dirt and gravel and potholes and boiled peanut stands and cute but abandoned gas stations and quiet Methodist cemeteries and baseball diamonds with outfields fried by the sun. Those country roads. The ones with one lane or none because there are no painted lines, only painted skies and unpainted roads lined by old shotgun houses and the world's smallest post offices and scrawny pine trees that stood tall because they were pine trees damn it, towering Carolina pines.

Since they'd been married, Harold had never come home from work empty handed. He'd have something—a blueberry cobbler from Elsa's, a woven basket from the ladies on Seaver's Island, a vegetable from the market that he couldn't pronounce or looked too funny not to buy. Always something.

Today was pink celery.

He climbed the brick steps of 326 Wateree Lane. Before Harold could even knock, Livy appeared at the door.

“Yes?” she peeked her head out, her short pearl hair— in shine and color— pulled up in what was trying to be a bun, but her short strands freed themselves and fell to her heart shaped face. A few flecks of blue and green speckled her white hair. She must’ve been painting.

“I have a delivery for a Miss Livy. Pink celery. Scientific name: rhubarb.”

“Do I have to sign for it?”

Harold examined the clipboard that did not exist.

“Nope, says here a kiss will do.”

Livy stepped out onto the porch, took Harold’s suitcase, rhubarb and imaginary clipboard, raised onto her toes and kissed the husband she loved so much. After setting his things down inside, Livy returned and followed Harold’s winding tracks around the pollen-dusted porch.

Perched on the stoop, he had already taken his socks off. He shut his eyes as he curled his toes over the cool brick steps. Toes on brick, hands on porch. In that moment, Harold was perfectly happy. Yes, Harold, in his khakis, in his tucked undershirt and untucked oxford, in that brief, fleeting, gentle breeze, hello, goodbye moment, was perfectly happy. Everyday after work, Harold would head out to the back porch and sit where he sat in that moment.

Everyday he’d watch squirrels jump from mossy oak to mossy oak. He’d watch the tide slide in over the muddied river bottom, the crabs all scurrying around. He’d always wonder if they were running from something or towards something. This low country ecosystem, the kinesis of it all, was neatly maintained in the frame of his eye. Looking at the picture frame that God, or Someone, hung, suspended in humid midair,

Harold would begin to unbutton his shirt. His eyes always remained on the picture, never the buttons. His hands moved the way that mothers' hands braid their daughters' hair, the way that fathers' hands whisk the Sunday flapjack mix, the way that grandfathers' hands page through the evening paper--mindlessly. Mindlessly, so deep in the moment they become removed from the movement.

Livy sat down in one of the rockers, grabbing and pulling up each foot, forming her pretzel of legs. She rubbed her ankles in the way that you do something without knowing you are doing it. With a soft humming, she moved her thumbs in gentle circles. A stray hangnail became a needle, encouraging the vinyl of her skin to play. The song began with an inaudible crackle, and Livy began to join in, singing the melody of the track. With each revolution, her song crescendoed, until it became audible.

As Harold's hands slowly moved from button to button, he heard Livy's song. She sang the same words her mormor sang to her, the words taking her back to the rivers and words of her girlhood summers spent with her grandmother. Harold always wanted to go to Sweden, so Livy took him there each evening in song.

Kärleken är så förunderligt stark,

kuvas av intet i världen.

Rosor slår ut i den hårdaste mark,

som sol över mörka gården.

Mitt hjärta är ditt,

ditt hjärta är mitt,

och aldrig jag lämnar det åter.

*Min lycka är din,
din lycka är min
och gråten är min när du gråter.*

And because Harold knew what the song meant but not what the words meant, Livy sang the love song once more, in English.

By the end of Livy's song, Harold front was unbuttoned. The ends of his shirt danced along to the music that was still there, surrounding them. The music that left Livy's lips. The music that the universe couldn't stand to see go, so She reincarnated it as the breeze. Silent, but still there.

In the breezy song of silence, Harold continued his task. Not a single button was left fastened for next morning's ease. Pinning the shirt in between his knees, his vibrato hands continued to work. He undid the tiny buttons that had no business being undone. The cuffs, even those collar ones. He worked along to the beat of a song that could not be heard. Once the job was done, he rose and sunk into the rocker next to Livy. He leaned back against the scratchy wood of the rocking chair. He never did get around to sanding or staining those chairs. He never got around to sanding or staining those chairs because he had absolutely no intention to do so. Those snags and occasional splinters were just one more thing to feel. Harold was in love with Livy. Harold was also in love with feeling, however imperfect those feelings may be.

Never one to back down from a challenge, Harold raised his hands off the arm of the chair and his hands found a new home on top of his belt. His shaky hands jiggled the

belt, like the ride attendants did when at the amusement parks of his youth, checking the seatbelts before a ride dispatched. Suddenly he felt a craving for popcorn.

He slowly pulled the tail of the belt out of the loop. He tugged the belt to the right then—the hardest part—groped, then grabbed the metal tooth and hinged it to the left. He took a moment to rest, watching a squirrel recover from a near miss, as his belt flopped open in a leather ‘W.’ He tugged with both hands on the square head of the belt. Curling up the rattlesnake in victory, a mist of mental silence rolled in, replacing the crackling heat of inner noise that always overtook Harold when he wrestled to take off his belt.

Now it was his turn to sing.

Harold sat there, switching off between whistling and humming—yesterday about how in his mind he’s going to Carolina, today about Chantilly lace and a pretty face and a pony tail a-hangin’ down. Livy could sing the most beautiful Swedish ballads and lullabies. Harold’s family, on the other hand, had been in the States for centuries and his ancestors were the ever-exotic Brits, so Harold’s songs were only ever in English. His songs were short and silly and a bit raspy, but Livy loved them. So he sang them.

So there was Harold. Bare feet. Undershirt. Khakis. Rattlesnake. Oxford. White. White. Brown. Brown. White.

White was Harold’s favorite color. He wore a white oxford and white undershirt everyday, even though they always ended up kissed by brown-lipped fairies whenever he drank coffee, which was always.

“Black, or really any other color, would hide the stains much better,” Livy said one night as she was making dinner.

“But Livy, stains are OK. Life is full of stains, my shirts no exception.”

Livy loved Harold, but his poetic ramblings could even cause his dear Livy to look up at the ceiling and sigh.

“Plus,” Harold added, his smile growing, “I don’t want anyone to think I’m perfect.”

“Oh Harold,” she responded, “I don’t think you’re in danger of anyone thinking that.”

Livy bit her lip to hold down the smile that was trying to escape from the corner of her mouth. She looked at Harold out of the corner of her eyes, then went back to her cutting board. Shutting his eyes, Harold could hear the rhythmic beat as Livy chopped the rhubarb. But he could also hear the smile in her voice. He loved living with all five senses, but if— God forbid— he lost his sight, he’d be at peace knowing he’d still be able to hear Livy smile.

Livy assembled the smulpaj, the rhubarb crumble, in the same dish—white with little black and yellow flowers—that her mormor would always make it in. After popping it into the oven, the two made their way to the dining room.

The table was set as it always was. A white lace runner sat on the brown farmhouse table as two white taper candles guarded a vase bursting with white flowers—today, hydrangeas. They would sit in antique chairs—side by side— positioned so that their sitter could look out at the window-framed valley, as they did every night. They would eat off settings of white fine china, as they did every night.

Harold believed in many things. God. Karma. Prana. Salt. And using wedding gifts. Harold and Livy never bothered to get normal, regular plates after their wedding.

One, because they already had plates, really nice plates. Two, because the couple had no business with the normal or the regular.

Livy filled two crystal classes with water from a crystal pitcher. Neither of them drank. Harold didn't drink because too many family members, as he grandmother had put it, took to the drink. Besides, even if he were to sit down with a scotch, nearly all of that golden liquid would slosh out by the time the glass ever touched his lips. And Livy didn't drink because Harold didn't drink. Simple as that.

Everyday at 7 p.m., Livy would pull on a black cashmere turtleneck—short sleeve in the summer, long sleeve in the winter— and Harold would stare at her and her halo of static-y wisps. And everyday at 7 p.m., Harold was reminded that angels exist.

Harold ate dinner in his undershirt, always eager for a good paradox. Livy loved him too much to argue with him. So there they sat. A man in cotton and a woman in cashmere. Harold and Livy slipped in between chair and china. Well, Livy slipped in, Harold did more of a labored shimmy.

Livy was everything that Harold was not. She was dainty, quiet and shy. She always dressed for the occasion. Friends likened her to Audrey Hepburn, but Harold would always shake his head. No, no. Livy is far prettier, and has kinder eyes too.

The man in the undershirt and the woman prettier than Audrey Hepburn sat down, bowed their heads, and prayed to a God that they loved but didn't understand. They raised their glasses in a toast and Harold blessed his hand with holy tap water.

After dinner, Livy brought out a pot of decaf, or as Harold called it, imposter coffee. When Harold had more muscle and less shakes, he went to Spain to climb Pico de Teide. His guidebooks marked it as a steady five-hour climb. While climbing the

volcano, he found a beautiful paradox. A barren lunar landscape with flowers that bloomed out of pure grit. Because they wanted to. Even if he wanted to, he couldn't leave. Harold learned early on to surrender to the sublimity of paradox. He stayed for five years.

He left many things in Spain: the past, anxiety, his tattered hiking boots. He brought many things back with him too. A tan, a book of Spanish poetry and a love for coffee. Dark, dark, dark coffee. The kind of coffee that's so dark you think it might stain your eyes just looking at it, but it doesn't stain your eyes, just your teeth.

When he and Livy first started dating, Harold couldn't stop talking about Spain, and Livy learned that he never really left. Livy always jokingly teased him that he was a faux Spaniard, a wannabe Hemingway. They would watch the sunset each night, and each night Livy would nudge him and whisper, "You know, it also rises." She continued to tease him once they were married, but that didn't mean she didn't indulge him. She would surprise him with paella or tortilla espanola or croquetas, not on birthdays or anniversaries, but on random days. Livy didn't believe in saving things for special occasions. She believed that people, not calendar dates, were special.

Livy poured the coffee then disappeared. She heard a quiet saucer cymbal play as she made her way to the kitchen. As she pulled the smulpaj out of the oven, she heard Harold call to her.

"So I found the spot where I want to be buried."

She brought the rhubarb crumble over to the table.

"Is that so?"

He nodded but she couldn't see.

“I had a nice drive home today. Benjamin was out, by the way. I pulled over to pet him and give him our best.” Benjamin was a mule. “Anyways, so I was driving and you know that beautiful white episcopal church just past the sunflower field but before Bettie’s? Well out back there is this beautiful weeping willow. So beautiful you could cry. That’s probably why it’s weeping. I want to be buried under that tree. Plenty of shade, too. I won’t burn in this Carolina heat. She’s massive. Must be a hundred years old. A beautiful, beautiful old lady,” Harold paused, looking out the window as if the tree was right outside. “I think she’d take good care of me.”

Livy took this all in.

“Even though you’re Catholic?”

“I don’t think the tree will mind.”

Later that evening, Harold and Livy sat in bed reading. Livy, *Peter Pan*. Harold, *Buddhist Funeral Rituals*. They read in silence, but their silence, like many things, did not last. As Harold started to turn the page, his hand began to quiver and the page tore in half. The sentence he was reading took on a new form. The words to the left of the fissure read like a broken poem.

*In tōrō nagashi, they believe that the paper lanterns
the souls of the departed to the spirit world. Traditi
come from water, so lanterns represent bodies retur*

“Damn it,” Harold grumbled.

He pushed off the covers, rolled out of bed and took off his pajama pants. And his top. And his underwear. Livy looked up from Neverland to see her naked husband, a lost boy himself.

“Where are you going?”

“To wash off. Wanna come?”

Harold, a professor, was always teaching people. He taught Livy that there are times to think and times to just be. This was a time to be.

“Sure.”

Livy set her book aside, slid onto the cool hardwood and took off her pajama pants. And her top. And her underwear. Hand in hand, they walked through the house, down the sloping yard, to the river. Mooning the moon.

The moon was high that night, a white marble tossed up from his boyhood, but God must have wanted it—his marble, his boyhood. An invisible hand pinched this marble moon. But it did not remain a marble forever. From a boyhood marble, it transformed into the face of a boy, then the face of a girl, and finally, the face of a lady. The hand released the lady and Harold feared that she would fall, but she didn’t. Harold looked up at her and waited for her to give a smile of permission. The moon lady gave a welcoming nod.

Livy took Harold’s hand and guided him into the river. Slow, swaying steps set to the music that poured from the moon lady’s ears.

Nothing miraculous happened in the water. It was not the river Jordan. Harold was not healed. His shakes did not go away. But they did transform. They became beautiful ripples. The river was a black ribbon of silk. Like God poured a long stream of

the darkest coffee ever brewed. Black silky coffee. The moon blew gently on the coffee river where Harold stood, the water quivering under her breath. There was a gust—she blew too hard—and Arabica tears swirled around Harold. It worked. The river became cooler. Livy stepped towards Harold and held him as tightly as a gentle person could and she gave him something that felt an awful lot like warmth.

The next morning, Harold and Livy woke up on the couch wrapped in knit blankets and nothing else. Livy got up, rewrapped her blanket and shuffled into the kitchen to make some coffee. Harold smoothed his hand over where Livy had slept, the leather still warm under his palm.

“You still going to your ceramics class?” Livy asked Harold as she filled up the coffee pot at the sink.

Harold had been taking ceramics classes for a few weeks now. Harold loved anything hands-on. The more he shook, the more he did things that challenged him. Like he was playing against life, seeing her bet and raising her. Shakes? Woodshop. Shakes? Tap class. More shakes? Clay pigeon shooting. But his favorite challenge had been throwing pottery. As his nerves were being torn down, he was building something up. With his own hands. With his own goddamn please stop shaking hands.

“Wouldn’t miss it. We’re finally moving on from basics and making the modern day Holy Grail: the coffee cup.”

Harold sat up and turned around and propped his elbows up on the pass through window. Livy shut off the faucet, leaned forward and kissed Harold on the forehead.

“Good morning,” Livy said as she ran a hand through his bedhead.

“Good morning, love,” Harold said, bringing Livy’s hands together and kissing them. He adjusted his blanket and made his way to the kitchen. His morning movements were always in slow motion. He clambered onto one of the stools.

“You do have your doctor’s appointment at 3 p.m.,” Livy reminded Harold as she flipped the coffee maker on. “So don’t stay at the studio too late.”

“I won’t,” Harold told the countertop, then looked at Livy with what was trying to be a smile.

They were quiet for a while.

The first searing drop of coffee broke the silence.

That evening, Livy watched Harold walk up the path to the house. She stepped out onto the porch. He was carrying quite the load: two coffee mugs, a baguette, some woven placements and a porcelain pie bird. He looked like he wanted to make a crack about stopping at every roadside stand and shop. He opened his mouth, but only silence poured out.

Livy looked at her husband. His eyes seemed a darker shade of brown. Stormy espresso eyes. She took his load and set everything down on the entryway table. She reached for his hand and he let her hold it.

“Hey.”

Harold looked down at Livy.

“Do you want to throw some pottery?”

“I don’t think they have studio hours today. Just those earlier classes.”

“I know a place that’ll be open.”

He disappeared for a minute and returned with two of their white porcelain mugs. Somehow they were not coffee stained. Harold slipped out the door, leaving his keys behind. Livy followed. They walked around the house, down the sloping hill and along the river. Past where they skinny dip. Past the wild berry patch. Past the rusted community grill. Past the checkers tables. To the rock.

They stared at the massive rock that sat in the middle of the river. Harold kicked off his shoes. Livy did the same. He handed her a mug.

No talking. Hold hands. Lift other hands. Still. Not shaking. Hands. Wet grass. Wet sandy grass. Step forward. Left. Right. Left. Right. One. Two. Three.

Shatter.

The porcelain smashed against the rock and the broken pieces floated down the river like white flower petals or white lanterns or both and maybe the petal lantern shards guide souls to the spirit world or just guide them along the river because the water is their home.

In that moment, Harold didn't feel his tremors or shakes. He didn't feel anything, except the early evening breeze, his wife's hand, and maybe a little bit Buddhist.

Salilaraya.

Later in the night, the petal lantern shards would glow, lit by a moonlight match, and they would keep flowing, keep guiding and become smaller and smaller until out of eyesight but in existence because rivers flow and keep flowing because nothing goes

away it just flows forever and becomes a part of something that cannot be entirely seen or understood, but it is still there, flowing.

THE MOTHER ROAD

[RELATIONSHIP]

“There was only one American stopping at the motel.”

Nona was falling asleep as she read the first words. The green floral bedspread somehow comforted her and lulled her into a deep sleep.

She did not know any of the people she passed on the way to and from the ice machine outside. Her room was on the second floor facing the wasteland of NM 122, a dusty corpse of the once glorious Route 66. It also faced a statue of Madonna of the Trail and the desert garden, the idea of which made her chuckle. She imagined the collection of cacti looking out at the vast stretch of road, watching cars, people and decades pass by. There were tall ones and short ones. The Saquares notified the others of the sky conditions and the faces of drivers. The Peyotes reported on soil conditions and the worn and weary boots headed to the reception office.

In the good weather, there was always a writer reclined on a lone green bench, scribbling thoughts of a once glorious river road. Writers liked the way the cacti never seemed to grow and the bright teal paint of the motel facing the garden and the desert. Women came from a long way off to look up at the towering Madonna, the pioneer woman made of grit, love, crushed marble, Missouri granite and cement. They would study the courage and faith and wilderness held in her bonneted face. She was made of everything and she stoically endured the whipping sand and even the rare snow.

It was snowing. The snow clung to the cacti. Snow gathered in clumps on the gravel paths. The desert horizon remained a steady line of dust, holding its breath, its ground as it eyed the white visitors coming steadily, with the lazy confidence of whiteness. A cold gust blew, and the desert horizon was forced to exhale. A shaky, sandy breath spread out over the ground, and for a moment, snow and sand danced together. Then calmness came and the horizon returned to a straight, dusty line, motionless in the snow. The cars were gone from the parking spots by the Madonna statue. Across the garden in the doorway of the reception office, a maid stood looking out at the emptiness of it all.

The American woman stood at the window looking out. Outside right under her window a dog was crouched under one of the once green now white tables. The dog was trying to curl himself up, nose to tail, so that he would not get snowed on.

“I’m going down and getting that puppy,” the American woman said.

“I’ll do it,” her mother offered from the bed.

“No, don’t get up, mama. Lie down. I’ll get it.” She looked down at the dog. “The poor puppy trying to hide from the snow under a table.”

The mother returned to her crossword, lying propped up with all four pillows behind her back.

“Don’t catch a cold. Put on another layer,” the mother said.

But the young woman did not have extra layers. She prepared for sand, not snow. The young woman went downstairs and the motel owner stood up and smoothed her boat neck poncho as the woman stepped into the office. Her desk was a cube nestled into the

back corner of the office. The counter was L-shaped and hinged up to allow entry. The motel owner was an old woman and very short.

“La nieve,” the young woman said. She liked the motel owner.

“Sí, sí, señorita, mal tiempo. It’s very bad weather. Strange too. The snow.”

She stood behind her wood paneled desk in the dim, florescence of the office. The young woman liked her. She liked the way she smiled with sky pride when she received any compliments. She liked her dignity. She liked the way she wanted to care for her. She liked the way she felt about owning Nueve Nidos. She liked her rounded face and the dark ringlets that framed it. There was no white in her hair.

Liking her, she pressed her thumb into the door’s handle and looked out. It was snowing harder. She opened the door, stepped out and ran into the maid, vacuum in hand. The young woman read her nameplate— Dolores— before stepping aside and holding the door as the maid stopped in.

She looked back out at the snow and the garden. The dog would be around to the right. Perhaps he would be huddled under the flower boxes. As she stood under the roof’s cover, a bath robe wrapped around her shoulders. It was the maid who she passed earlier. Dolores.

“You must keep warm,” she smiled, speaking Spanish. Of course, the motel owner must have sent her.

With the maid watching her with a curiosity, she walked along the gravel path until she was under her window. The table was there, dusted white in the snow, but the dog was gone. She was suddenly disappointed. The maid looked up at her.

“Has perdido cualquier cosa, señorita?”

“There was a dog,” said the American girl.

“A dog?”

“Sí, un perro.”

“A dog?” the maid laughed. “A dog in the snow?”

“Yes,” she said, “under the table.” Then, “Oh, I wanted it so much. I wanted a puppy.”

When she spoke English, the maid’s smile faded and was replaced with its normal pleasant blankness.

“Come, señorita,” she said. “We must get back inside. You will be cold.”

“I suppose so,” said the American girl.

They went back along the gravel path and under the roof’s cover. The maid collected the robe and walked off to the laundry. As the American girl passed the office, the owner smiled from her desk. Something felt very small and tight inside the girl. The owner and the maid made her feel very sad and at the same time really happy. She had a momentary feeling of supreme happiness. She went up the stairs. She opened the door of the room. Anna was on the bed, still working on a crossword.

“Did you get the dog?” she asked, putting the booklet down.

“It was gone.”

“I wonder where it went to,” she said, resting her eyes from reading.

She sat down on the bed.

“I wanted it so much,” she said. “I don’t know why I wanted it so much. I wanted that poor puppy. It isn’t any fun to be a poor puppy out in the snow.

Anna was back at the crossword.

The American woman went over and stood in front of the cheap full-length mirror. She studied the curve of her nose, first from one side and then the other. Then turned around and watched the way her dark hair swayed against the small of her back.

“Don’t you think it would be a good idea if I cut my hair?” she asked, loosely gathering her hair at the nape of her neck.

Anna looked up and saw her daughter’s cascading black hair, and saw the long hair of her mother, her mother’s mother and all of their mothers.

“I like it the way it is.”

“I get so tired of it,” she said. “I get so tired of carrying it all around.”

Anna shifted her position in the bed. She hadn’t looked away from her daughter since she started to speak.

“You look beautiful, my love. Absolutely beautiful,” she said.

Her daughter walked away from the mirror and went over to the window and looked out. It was getting dark.

“I want to chop my hair and have it bounce above my collarbone and never be able to pull it back,” she said. “I want to have a puppy sit on my lap and feel its little heartbeat as it sleeps.”

“Is that so, my love?” Anna said from the bed.

“And I want to travel. Far. All over the place. No ties. I want to hit the open road and I want it to be summer and I want to keep moving and I want a Volkswagen van and I want a puppy, that puppy, to ride shotgun and I want to go far and fast and now.”

“Oh, my love, slow down. Come here, sit down,” said Anna, patting the bed with a pen threaded between her fingers. She was doing her crossword again.

Her daughter was looking out of the window. It was quite dark now and still snowing in the desert palms.

“I want a dog,” she said, “I want a dog. I want a dog now. If I can’t cut my hair or run away, I can at least have a dog.”

Anna was not listening. When her daughter turned around to look at her mother’s silence, there was no mother to look at. Anna was gone. The young woman paced and traced over every inch of evergreen carpet and white tile. Confused, she returned her gaze to the window where the light had shone down upon the desert garden. She scanned the view for her mother.

Someone knocked at the door.

“Adelante,” she said, rubbing her eyes open. She closed the book and walked over to open the door, book still in hand.

In the doorway stood the maid.

“Excuse me,” she said. “You requested a wake up call for 7 a.m.” The maid smiled when she saw the book in Nona’s hand. “Ah Señor Hemingway. I love him. Te gusta?”

Still coming out of her dream, Nona just stared at the woman, blinking her confusion. The maid pointed at the book.

“Oh yes, Hemingway, I love him. I want to write like him.”

“You are a writer?”

“One day, I will be.”

“But not today?” the maid asked with a smile.

“Not today,” Nona replied with a smile.

“You look like you had a good sleep,” the maid said, gesturing to the sleep lines on Nona’s face.

“A very deep sleep. I dreamed I was in a Hemingway story.”

“You dreamed in a story?”

Nona nodded. “It happens a lot. Last fall I almost exclusively dreamed in Fitzgerald.” But she lost the maid at “exclusively” and then again at “Fitzgerald.” So she returned to Hemingway. “Do you have a favorite Hemingway?”

“*The Sun Also Rises*.” She paused. “I like it for the bull fights and the sadness and the mountains.”

“I went to Pamplona once.”

“Sí?”

“I was studying abroad in Spain. We went for a weekend. Took the train. It was cool—the white outfits and the panuelos and the tinto de verano. But what I remember most is the smell of urine running down the cobblestone streets.”

The maid wrinkled her nose. “That gross, and I’m a maid.” She laughed. “Ah, which reminds me.” The maid then pulled out the checkout slip from her pocket. “Para ti.” She took the slip. Both women smiled, gave the gentlest of nods, and then Nona shut the door.

She packed the book into her bag and began to change for the day. Nona watched her own silent sadness in the mirror as she dressed in a blue patterned skirt that grazed her ankles, as she wrapped a black shawl around her shoulders. After packing up her few belongings in a tapestry bag, Nona went down to the office and into the breakfast nook.

She eyed the selection and the basket of mantecadas whose sign read: One per customer, por favor. She took two and turned in her key.

As she was rummaging through her glove box for the atlas, she heard a tapping on her window. She looked up to see the maid, smiling and holding something. Nona put the window down.

“Yogurt,” she said, passing a cup through the open window. “De fresas. Muy delicioso.”

“Gracias,” Nona said. With that, she pulled out of her space and onto the highway, where she drove for hours. She went along in highway hypnosis until looking up just in time to see an elk saunter onto the road. Immediately, she slammed on her breaks and reached a hand out to protect her passengers, all piled into the front seat: a cup of yogurt, a ceramic jar and an imaginary tri-colored dog that she want so badly to be real. With parted lips and a rabbit’s heart, she watched the elk strut across the road.

Shakily, she let her foot off the break and slowly pressed down onto the gas, steering the car to the shoulder. She unbuckled her seatbelt, got out of the car, jogged around the front, and flung open the passenger’s door. Her shoulder held the door back, as she carefully picked up the pot and examined it with anxious hands and anxious eyes.

The terra cotta was cool against her hot palms. She ran her fingers over the fiery red hummingbirds, their painted wings looking first like wings then suddenly like grapefruit. Sliced open, thrown into the sky and beating its citrus wings. She held the pot up to her ear and listened for the beating of pithy wings and a ruby red humming. She heard both. Relieved, she placed the jar back on the seat, opened up the yogurt and kissed the tri-colored dog that her heart wanted her eyes to see.

Back behind the wheel, Nona said nothing, thought nothing and felt everything, mainly the wind. The wind in her hair, around her ears and across her collarbone. She went on like this for a very long time until something caught her eye. Someone. A woman. Another fierce Madonna of the Trail emitting the same beautiful ferocity of spirit as the last Madonna. Once more she pulled over. She let the dog run around, but she made the jar stay. Nona walked up to the woman and sat at her feet. She looked up at the woman's face, hoping to feel the beams of resilience that shone from the pioneer woman's eyes. But she only felt colder. And tears. She felt tears. Her tears fell upon the Madonna's feet, washing away desert grit. She wiped at the tear river with her long black hair, polishing the woman's worn boots.

Her nose to the woman's feet, her hand gripped around her own hair brush, Nona suddenly felt warm. She felt the woman's rays. Lifting her gaze up, she locked eyes with the Madonna and felt warmer and warmer. Nona stood, shrugged her shawl off and caught it gently in her hands. Then she climbed up to the woman and looked at the rivers of wrinkles that flowed deeply across her face. Letting go of the shawl, Nona reached up with her right hand and traced the Madonna's rivers and tried to imagine her journey. The miles. The years. The hurt. Then with both hands she swung the shawl around the Madonna and it floated around her shoulders. Nona tied the black shawl in a knot so the pioneer woman could keep warm.

Pleased, Nona whistled audibly to the dog who responded with an inaudible bark, as most imaginary dogs do, and the two travelers returned to the road. Despite the unusual cold and even more unusual snow flurries, Nona drove with the windows down. The wind caressed her bare arms and lifted her long black hair into air, where it danced,

weightless. She glanced down at her skirt and found herself wearing a river. Her skirt flapped in the breeze and a million shades of blue flowed from her hips to her ankles. Nona pressed down on the gas and the wind picked up and she glanced down at the rushing river and smiled at the little waves crashing and lapping against her legs.

She tore her eyes away from her skirted river and towards the black, paved river ahead. Then she saw a sign stuck into the riverbank. She didn't need the sign, she would always remember, never forget, where to turn, but she thanked the sign anyway. After changing her course, she left the asphalt river for a dirt river that soon turned into a water river. Once she arrived, Nona didn't waste a moment. She opened her door, held it open with a foot, and grabbed the terra cotta jar. The dog jumped out of the car but waited for Nona. Together, they walked down to the river. Nona kicked off her shoes and stepped onto a boulder that edged out into the water. The dog sat at her feet as Nona reached into the jar and sprinkled a handful of ashes over the rushing river. The ashes soon disappeared, pulled into a white, foamy embrace. Quickly the ashes flowed downriver, and new water passed by Nona each second. She and the dog then walked towards a nearby groove of the river bank. Feet in, paws in.

But after a moment, the dog sprang onto all fours, then all threes as he lifted his paw, lifted his nose in the direction of the river. He stood frozen like that for a minute, then sprang off, running along the bank. The dog now out of view, Nona turned back to the scene ahead. Soft oranges and pinks poured from a once blue sky as the sun began to set. As Nona watched the Alma river flow. As a girl ate sweet bread. As it began to snow.

GOGH WITH LOVE

My papa was full of Van Goghisms. Any situation could be philosophized or Van Goghized. His favorite, uttered many a time in response to bullies and bruised hearts, was this: There is nothing more truly artistic than to love people. I can still hear his voice shouting across space and time to reach me.

“Think of each act of kindness, eselflessness and gratitude,” he once mused, “as a brush estroke.” Spanish words rarely start with an “s” sound. “Paint the world with love, Machi. Do not leave white espacios on the canvas, me entiendes?”

“Sí, Papa. I understand.” But I didn’t. And Papa knew this.

“Machi, ven aquí. Come here. Eshow me your hands. Tus manos.”

I remember unfolding two sweaty palms onto his acrylic-splattered jeans.

“You see these lines, Machi?” he asked, his dark, ragged thumb tracing my hand. “They are caminos, paths for your love. The amor estarts at your hands. You esee? As the love grows estronger, bigger, it turns blue.” He gently traced my veins with a paint-covered thumb. A blue hangnail left an invisible trail. I remember he took two of my fingers and pressed them up against my wrist.

“Eschua. Hear that?” I still remember feeling that batería, that fairy drummer softly keeping the beat. Papa took his calloused rainbow hands and covered mine. He guided my hand along my veins, my channels of love. He stopped over another batería. This drummer was stronger than his fairy friend.

“Corizon. Your heart. That is where you feel the love the strongest.”

We sat quietly for a while, absorbing this Van Goghism. Papa went back to his canvas, picked up his brush, swirled it in orange paint, but froze with his brush suspended in midair. At that moment, his brown eyes were full of something I did not know.

He turned to me. “But remember, Machi, it all estarted with your hands.”

Thirty years later, sitting on the floor of my four-story walk-up, I was still Van Goghizing. Still listening to papa’s voice. “Hermosa, no? The most beautiful color to paint the world is love,” he’d whisper to me through the wall. Leaning back, the brick’s calloused hands caught on my shirt. With my culo sitting on the Time’s obits, I began. Ana would kill me if I got paint on the hardwood.

Ninth Ave’s traffic light beamed in the side window, spotlighting my right hand’s waltz. Dip, stroke, wipe. Red, yellow green. My left hand slowly became a collage of fractured rainbows as paint touched palm. The faces below me looked like kindergarteners and Andy Warhol had overseen the colorization process. Blue faces. Purple Eyes. Pink Army uniforms. I gently squeezed my hands together. A kiss. I turned my palms up on my jeans. Watering eyes changed the acrylic hands into watercolors. With a dark green thumbprint I colored a man’s suit. Estébon Hernandez, 62. The traffic light switched from red to green. I leaned back again, draping two fingers over my left wrist. I fell asleep as car doors below opened and closed to the beat of a fairy drummer.

WHOSE VOICE THE WATERS HEARD

[LIFE]

The launch is heavier than I expected. It takes four of us to lift it, carry it down the hill and place it in the water as quietly as possible. Despite our efforts, the launch meets the water with a massive *splosh*, rising up into the chilling November air, and drenching us before returning back into the river.

“Shit, I forgot my backpack by the fence. Atticus grab it then let’s push off.”

“As you wish,” Atticus replies with the obligatory mock bow.

We are whispering, but the night makes everything louder. The moon threatens to make our secret endeavor not so secret. The whipping wind whirls our voices around and throws them downstream. Nature can be an evil mistress sometimes.

But Nature is not entirely against us. The November night wind creates a strong current to the south. God willing—though you can never tell with Him—we can reach the bridge without using the motor. Just Nature’s conveyor belt and a few strokes from some spare oars.

Jesus, Mary and Joseph-- where is Atticus?

“Atticus! Get your ass-icus in the launch!”

“Cool your jets, Liz, your bag only weighs a ton. Did you stuff all of China in here?”

As annoying as Atticus can be, he is the best person for the job. I’d love to bring the others along, but they don’t understand the why. Sure, *what’s* important, but *why* is everything.

Atticus knew Nate, not like how I knew—how I *know*—Nate, but still. It has been eight years since Nate died.

Nate for short.

Nathaniel for long.

And Nathaniel Ryan on scolding occasions.

Eight years. Well tomorrow it’ll be eight years. Today it’s only seven years, 11 months and 29 days.

How many minutes? Shit! I glance at my watch. 10:25 p.m.

I motion to the other two to send us off. Sean nods silent well wishes and Val lifts two fingers in a V.

“Sending good vibes, to all three of you,” she says.

“Alrighty. Ready, Att? Push off on three. One, two, three!”

The boat reluctantly lurches away from the dock, and the current captures us and leads us to our destination. It does most of the work; Atticus and I lean back in the boat. I reach into the deep pockets of Nate’s jacket, which swallows my slim frame. The military may fail in some areas, but they sure know how to make a hell of a good jacket. I pull out the black cloth and make my way to bow.

“Att, hold my legs.”

Leaning over the bow, I hinge at my waist and reach to the very tip of the boat. Carefully, I cover our bow light with the black cloth. We need some light, but I don't want to give ourselves away. When I come back up and regain my footing, we are just 100 meters from the bridge. Grabbing the oars, we carefully adjust our angle and glide towards the center pillar.

Clouds, once covering the moon, part, allowing moonlight to pour down onto us for a moment. Atticus and I look silly in our oversized camo. Though built, Atticus is not built like Nate.

Nate's uniforms are the most practical choice though. Lots of pockets. I was surprised that the cans of Milspray fit so easily into them. If we didn't have to cover such a large surface, I probably could have fit all of the Milspray in just my pants, no bag needed.

Normal spray paint won't do. You use normal tools for a normal job. Special job, special tools. Nate was issued a bunch of Milspray—classic military vehicle restoration paint. He was a supply truck driver. Dangerous job. He took a lot of pride in his job, especially in his vehicle's appearance. He used Milspray #595B gray and #30051 brown. God, the military is just oozing with creativity. Not Turkish Coffee or Tanbark. Just brown. Not Morning Fog or North Star. Just gray.

"Earth to Liz, come on, let's do this. We're on a tight schedule."

"Hand me 595B."

"Huh?"

"*Jesus*, the gray. Hand me the gray."

The bridge is old and covered in grime, debris, and profanity. Two done by Nature, one done by man. Nate rowed on this river every morning when he was on the team. He told me that it made him so sad to see such terrible things painted under the bridge. Words and phrases he dared not say. *Nigger. Fag. Fuck you.* Nate, in all his goodness, could never wrap his head around man's capacity for evil.

I use 595B as a primer. After two coats, the old graffiti become only faint shadows. To match the original color of the bridge, I coat the bridge wall in 30051. Atticus works on the left side, and we meet in the middle. Two hours later, the job is finished. Almost.

Grabbing the 37073 black, I walk to the other side of the launch and position myself so that I am looking at the left of the bridge support. Quietly, reverently, I spray an "N" right about water level. It's low tide now, so in a matter of minutes the tide will soon change. The Mousam will puff out its chest and rise—covering the "N."

People have been coming to this bridge to pay tribute since the '30s. When World War II sent boys away and returned corpses, people turned to the river for her healing. The Mousam's water level has risen over the last 80 years. It seems that the higher the death toll, the higher the river rises. Wanchese's elders always say that you could tell how tragic a year had been just by looking at the river. In 1941, no one had ever seen the river rise so fast.

This is a river with a sense of dignity. A river that will not leave someone forgotten and exposed. So like a mother pulling up a child's sheets, the river rose to cover the new tributes, to keep these souls safe in her blanketed embrace. Yes, factors like Hurricane Rosario and her storm surges impact the Mousam, but something more power,

more mystical has raised this river these past 80 years. The same mystical force that raises the river today. Soon at high tide, the “N” will be invisible. Buried under two feet of water. No one will know that it’s there.

Except us.

Me.

Atticus.

And Nate.

With one hand on the launch and one hand on the throttle, Atticus gently steered the boat towards the nearby shore. The darkness of night tries our eyes. Squinting, our eyes grope for the outline of the shore. All things at night are reduced to their shadows. Nothing really *is*, just *seems*. I see the scattered outlines of cattails and scrap pieces of wood. Since sight cannot be trusted when the Light is gone, I turn to sound.

Nate taught me that. That the eyes often lie. They play tricks. They place fictitious horrors and Things That Cannot Be in front you. Eyes can lie whether closed or open. No difference. But the ear, *ah*, the ear has no reason to lie. Our minds are not branded by sound the way they are branded by sight.

Holding my breath, I listen for the lapping of water against sand. A direct relationship. The louder the lapping, the closer we are to shore. Now the lapping has become so loud that in the silence of everything else it has tickled the center of my ear. I shiver. Noticing the cue, Atticus shuts off the motor and we drift the last few meters to shore.

“Anchor.”

Hhmp, Atticus grunts like his Pop Pop, as he lifts up the cement block. Looping some rope through the block, he ties, then secures, a mother earth knot. Att's dad was in the Navy. An officer. Not a Marine enlistee like Nate, but brave-as-hell nonetheless. After a quick smile of self-satisfaction at his damn good knot job, Att heaves the anchor to shore, where it lands with an almost comical *plop*. Almost.

I'd laugh if my heart weren't so damn broken. But I have something to do. Something serious. Something important.

God it's dark out. Darker than black. Att and I blindly shuffle towards the bow. One leg at a time I swing out of the boat. Att perches himself on the bow tip, his back to shore, and does a backflip—landing perfectly on the sand. Lucky bastard. He could have broken his neck, jumping off like that into a void of darkness. But he didn't. He could have lost his father in war. But he didn't.

“Hey Tony Hawk, take a seat will ya? I want to do this right.”

His smile changed from smirk to a knowing grin. “Damn right. My main man Nate deserves the best going away party that can be thrown.”

Att sits down right next to me. After glancing my way a few times, he pats both of his thighs. I smile, and accepting his invitation, sit on his lap. It's both familiar and comforting. For the next hour we watch the moon summon the water to rise. In the comfort of the moment and Att's lap, I fall asleep. First peaceful moments in months. But I am jolted awake by the Now of the moment. It's time. Rising to my feet, I take a slow, deep inhale. Then I kick off my shoes and shorts until I'm only wearing Nate's jacket. Atticus hands me my goggles and headlamp. I place both on. Giving Att's hand a quick, meaningful squeeze, I switch my light on and wade into the water, heading towards the

bridge's center column. Inch by inch. I want to remember this. I want time to move painfully slow, so slow that I can feel each passing second and finally acknowledge how significant, how terribly significant, each second is.

The river bottom is squishy and covered in a film of algae and rocks. My arches tenderly step over each thing. Every thing. Feeling it all.

Water up to my waist.

My ribs.

My collarbone.

Here I take a moment to gather myself. For composure I finger Nate's name tape and for courage I finger over "U.S. Marines." Adjusting my already adjusted goggles, I breathe deep within. Not from the mouth, or lungs or core. From something so deep inside me, like my whole body is taking a breath—every part of it. And then, I

Sink.

Slowly and thoughtfully, I let a little air escape as I descend. I run my hands down the bridge's support, remember that the eyes can lie. As I sweep my hand to the left, I feel the surface raise, ever so slightly. Only noticeable to those looking for Something. Soon my eyes see what my hands confirmed. My graffiti, my love letter—"N"—nestled beneath the water's surface. As my head scans left to right, I see the alphabet jumbled up in beautiful tributes. Not just my "N" rests in aquatic peace. My headlamp illuminates "K.B." and "Cam" and "G.E.H." and "Baby E" and dozens of others. A bodiless graveyard. A graveyard for the soul. For souls.

I swim further down, and with each stroke I meet more beautiful souls. "V.T.H." I bet everyone loved her. "M.H." A wise man if ever there was one.

The waters heard, still hear, our voices, their voices. Our graffiti, kept safe under the river, whispered its secrets and love to the water, who silently answered and said “Yes,”

“I understand,”

“That’s terrible,”

And, “You are loved.”

A light feeling in my body reminds me of my limits and tells me it is time for me to go. I switch off my headlamp. No lying eyes. I want only truth. I don’t want to see. I want to know. Kicking towards the surface, I shut my eyes and open my ears. The sound of water lapping – signaling my closeness to the surface—is soon joined by soft, rhythmic melodies of trumpets, drums and flutes.

As they carried him, they played the tune.

O Christ! Whose voice the waters heard

And hushed their raging at Thy word,

Who walked'st on the foaming deep,

and calm amidst its rage didst sleep;

All of these two and few lettered souls – “like J.J” and “S.Wundt” and “D.L.F”—the water heard. We once cried out and were heard. Our searing pain concentrated into a handful of letters and a pocketful of paint.

...Oh hear us when we cry to Thee

For those in peril on the sea!

My ears can see, ever so gently, the folded flag, his thick, dark hair, his goofy smile, his concerned eyes, his trusty bottle of Guinness, his kindness, his huge size 15 issued combat boots and his 595B primer.

Smiling and crying, I kick with all my might, ignoring my throbbing thighs and heart. One last kick. My head pierces the water's surface and my face is blasted with Aliveness by the November air. Spinning around, I open my eyes.

The darkness looks less dark.

GRANDMOTHER'S PERFUME

Once, when I was a young girl, my teacher told our class to bring in something that represented a family member.

People brought in signed baseballs, sepia soaked photos and spools of ribbon. One girl said she was going to bring in her grandmother's perfume.

I nodded. That's a good idea. I'll do that too.

I went home that day and began gathering my grandmother's perfume. I ran outside, my white babydoll dress a cape as I windmilled down the hill. I held on to my dandelion crown with one hand.

As the wind blew, I ate my hair.

As I fell, I ate the grass.

I sprang up and skipped over to the witch hazel shrubs. I gathered leaves and bark, keeping them safe in my waistband. Then I ran to the side garden and picked a few sprigs of lavender, adding them to my underwear crown. Finally, I stumbled down the

sloping river bank and waded into the low tide muck, curling and uncurling my toes. I walked with curled and uncurled toes to a cattail patch, grabbed the smallest one and held it in between my teeth as I ran back up the hill.

I followed the stone path around to papa's workshop and shoved my hand into the wood shavings bucket. I closed my fist as tight as I could as I ran up to the house and into the kitchen. With two feet and one hand, I climbed the cabinet and fished down a mason jar. I sat down on the white tiled countertop, dumped the sawdust in the jar, then pulled out the witch hazel, cattail and lavender, and I put those in too.

Jumping down, I made for the library and pulled down a book. I flipped through, admiring the ants dancing across pressed wood pulp. The ants stopped their dance and I ripped out two pages, then stuffed them in the jar. I twisted the lid on tight and admired the jar from all angles.

I ran outside onto the porch and held the jar up to the sky and the light trickled down from the scrawny pines and that day I learned what the world alchemy meant.

I brought my grandmother's perfume to class the next day. I was so excited. I kept unscrewing the lid to sneak a whiff of my grandmother. Multiplication and spelling smelled lovelier than they ever had.

The other girl who also brought in her grandmother's perfume went first. She passed around her bottle and everyone smiled. Her grandmother smelled like roses. Then I passed my grandmother's perfume around. I was the only one that smiled.

My grandmother smelled like witch hazel and lavender and changing tides and unstained floorboards and thick novels.

My grandmother did not smell like roses.

SHIPWRECKED STORIES

[DIRECTION]

He was a broken record and we loved his song. His voice was a jazz melody, husky and silky all at the same time. Everything was effortless.

The old man—we never did catch his name—told stories every night on his creaky old porch. Everyone came. By everyone I mean some. By some I mean us kids. We came to listen to him, the cicadas and the past. And the sea. Yes, we came to hear the sea.

He always sat in his chair, the proud captain of the *S.S. Porch*. His stories came like waves—frequent, with power, but somehow beautiful and graceful. He and his stories were thousands of leagues deep. We loved dancing along the white foam of his stories.

Each night we swam out to sea, though to most it would look like we ride our bikes to the old wooded house on the corner. We came to hear his shipwrecked stories. The beautiful, rich ones left on the floor of history, of collected memory.

It always began the same way. Watching him in his rocking chair, rhythmically moving back and forth like a boat gently rocking at sea. The deck of the porch became the *S.S. Porch*. We were still. Just sitting there, watching him sink into the past. We would wait quietly. Patiently. For him to surface, swimming from the depths of past and memory, emerging with glimmering sunken treasure: a story.

His eyes were always shut during the retrieval. Sometimes we held our breath. Worried he got lost. But he always came back to us. When he opened his eyes, slowly, he was ready to begin.

He told the same tales over and over. Sometimes our lips moved along with his without realizing it. “Have I told you the story of...” The answer was always yes, but we never said it.

One day, we paddled out to sea, and the old man wasn’t there. We were afraid he fell overboard, so we hopped onto bikes and into lifeboats and spread out in search of our captain. The night was dark. Black. So black we couldn’t tell pavement from water. But that’s life. Sometimes you sail the seven seas, and sometimes you can’t tell pavement from water. That’s what they say. Or at least that’s what our captain always told us.

That night we searched for hours, fanning out according to naval strategy. North, east, south, west. We covered all of it. Almost all of it. We were getting tired, but our captain gives us strength. As we peddle and paddle, we all whispered the words of his

shipwrecked stories. Whispering and peddling and whispering and paddling. And if sailors cried, we would have cried too. But they don't, so we didn't.

Amidst the sea of cresting whispers, we heard a noise. Not a soft noise like a whisper. A loud noise like a creak. So we followed the creaking wave. Whispering, peddling, paddling, stopping, listening. The other companies heard the creaky wave too. Their storied whispers and our whispers overlapped and our whispers synced up in perfect unison as we rode down Riverpoint hill with our eyes wide open, staring into the dark, and the hill takes us

Down

Down

Down to the river.

Our whispered stories stopped. Except one.

Someone was still whispering our beloved shipwrecked stories. Our captain. The old man was there, in his rocking chair, water up to his knees, rocking back and forth, telling the same stories to the sea, the ones that he always told us.

Time passed as it always does, fast then slow, then fast again. *I wonder if I'll ever see him again.* Days went by and once again, our captain as nowhere to be found. Not on the deck of the *S.S. Porch*, not at the waters edge.

"I don't know man, maybe he went north."

"North to where?"

We spoke as we peddled, as we paddled, along the river.

"I don't know. Just north."

“No, no. That’s not him. He wouldn’t desert us. At least not without sending us some kind of sign, some kind of order.”

“Well you know, maybe—”

“Whoa, hold on! Do you see that?”

“See what? I don’t see—Holy crap.”

Floating down the river, the captain’s old chair bobbed downstream, rocking back and forth, back and forth.

“Maybe it’s a sign.”

“Maybe he’s hurt.”

“Maybe it’s a sign.”

“Like what?”

“I don’t know man, a sign.”

“I know a sign when I see one. This is no sign.”

“Then what the heck is it?”

“A *story* man. A story.”

I’m not as young as I used to be. None of us are. A lot has happened since that night. And while most of it will never be acknowledged, here’s one thing that happened years ago.

A few days after our captain’s disappearance, we got together. Every sailor, especially a captain, deserves a search party. We met under the lonely glow of a single dock streetlight. All of us stood shoulder to shoulder, hovering in the amber glow, brave only in the light.

After gathering supplies and plans, we clipped lanterns on our boats. Like always, we paddled along as our oars cut through the water with a peculiar noise that almost sounded like a bike peddling. Someone—or our own anxiety— muted the air. The captain’s words still sat on in our minds and on our tongues, but they tasted different. We coasted down Riverpoint hill and stopped with a screeching swipe that insulted the night’s reverence. The river, breathing dark indigo breaths, looked insulted too. But then she saw our brokenness and forgave us as mothers do.

We got out of our boats, unclipped our lanterns and waded into the water, with one sailor on top of another’s shoulders. The tide was low and there was no moon, just a stray fingernail clipping that God forgot to sweep up. Our only light came from a swinging lantern outstretched by each seated sailor who moved at another’s will. Once at the shore side bridge support, the lumpy chested sailors and I removed our lumps and gave them to the sailors below. With shaky hands, we released clouds— some red, others white. The clouds swirled together, twirling in the air, the painted particles exhaling and coming to rest on the concrete. A stout candy cane base. Leaning against the painted concrete to steady ourselves, we topped off our tower with a giant white lantern and a red crown. Lumps returned to second story chests and lower hands once again gripped ankles. We made our way to our boats with wide hopeful steps.

Galosh.

Galosh.

Galosh.

New tattoos, shadows of the things we've touched, gave us new strength, and we paddled home that night with ripping strokes.

It doesn't matter what happened to our captain. Maybe he came back. Maybe he didn't. But the head of my bed nestles against my front porch with its river views—my back to the river, but my ears always towards it. And at night, when the windows are open, when the cicadas take a rare breath, I can hear a gentle rocking coming from the river, and I smile, confident that lighthouses guide sailors home even in the darkest of nights.

A BULLFROG'S ELEGY

On a June morning, I wake up to fog. I go outside and the air rolls a gentle mist around me. I can make out blades of grass and the fat, gnarled roots of trees, but looking up, I can only see the steely blue-white of early morning fog.

I hear a bullfrog croak from the perch of my foot. He is wonderfully slimy. I pick him up and, seeing that he has something to say, I let him whisper slimy words in my ear. He tells me to see the willow lady. I spin around, but I can only see blades of grass, roots of trees and the blue-white of early morning fog.

I think he wants me to get on my hands and knees and follow him across dew-strung grass, so I do. I hold his frog hand and crawl on one palm and two knees as the bullfrog croaks along to an early morning song.

When we reach the roots of a tree I have never seen, the bullfrog hops up to the tree's base and pats it with webbed fingers. I do the same with unwebbed fingers. I feel around the knobby bark and I close my eyes because it feels right. I move my hands the way that fat raindrops pitter patter. I smile as her face comes into my hands, traveling up my arms and into my mind.

"Hello, willow lady."

I feel her cheeks rise as she smiles a hello. Then my hands and her smile fall. My palms become sticky as she cries milky sap tears.

"Why are you crying, willow lady?"

Her branches breathe a mossy breath as she gestures to the morning scene. I nod and join her. Together we make a river. As she cries milky tears, as I cry dewy tears, as a bullfrog croaks an elegy.

RIVERBED REQUEST

[INNOCENCE]

He swore, he promised, that he wouldn't be hardened by war. That he would come back as the same old Milo. And not any promise, a pinky promise. Milo had broken promises in the past, but something about the way Della's tiny, pudgy finger delicately interlocked with his thick, calloused one seared the promise into his soul.

The promise sat deep inside of Milo, and it was the heaviest and lightest thing he would carry during noon marches, night patrol and S&D missions. It raised him up knowing that Della's love was with him. But at times it crushed him, this promise, this soul promise, to not change. To come back with calloused heels and hands but not a calloused heart.

In fact, the promise almost maddened him. The upholding of this promise overwhelmed him. His thoughts were not about prepping the weapons for the week and ordering spare parts; not about recording quantities of ammunition in the arsenal; not about keeping alive. Every other thought Milo had was about Della and the promise and a terrifying change.

On caravans from one camp to another, all of the men would glue their gaze to the window, scanning and rescanning the view with paranoid but focused eyes. Their minds filled with horrible imaginings: enemy attacks, rigged mortar rounds, lobbed grenades.

Not Milo.

His mind floated far away from the Kandahar and Helmand provinces.

He floated into a constant state of remembering. Cemented to the past and to the people and hearts left there.

In his state of remembering and thinking and reflecting and reminiscing, he would become haunted by that awful word: would. A word of the past, of Things That No Longer Are. He sifted through mental photographs, his fingers carefully at the edges, but each one was stamped with an ugly watermark of 'would.' All of his thoughts were of what was. It wasn't that he couldn't stand where he was. It was that he wasn't there. Home. He was here. In a tent, staring at a nylon wall, trying to picture his slate blue living room wall, as if he could will the transformation from duck canvas to drywall and find himself back in Pennsylvania.

Past overtook present.

Milo's eyes tried to bore a hole into the wall. No, no. Not a hole. A tunnel. A tunnel that he could crawl home through. Safely underground. Under blood spattered dirt,

exhausted bodies, whispered words and pleading prayers.

He squinted at the hole, the tunnel opening, that was not there. And then he climbed in. On all fours, he squinted at the end of the tunnel. He tried to see the buckling pine floors, the long table surrounded by an assortment of rockers, stools, piano benches and desk chairs. He tried to see the backdrop of the river protected behind sliding glass doors. But he couldn't. It was too far away. So he kept crawling. The dirt and sand underneath palm and knees became cooler with each step toward home. He crawled for a while in silence when suddenly a giggle whirled around the tunnel and his spine bowed under a new weight. Milo craned his neck around to see Della. She was wearing white leggings stuffed into red cowboy boots. Her barretted tiara was secured in a nest of tangled hair.

"Well howdy, Miss Della." Milo tipped his hat. "What are you doing in these here parts?"

"Hush! Horses can't talk."

"What if I'm a magical horse?"

She considered this. "Well that's okay then. Now we have to hurry. We're going to be late for tea."

At that, Della drove her heels into Milo's ribs, hard, and they made for home with a steady trot. A while later, everything began to come into view. Beyond a pile of firewood, his eyes ran from the pine floors up the walls over to the sliding glass door. His gaze pulled up on the lock and slid the door wide open. A gust of wind flew into the tunnel, scattering up ash, sand and dirt. Reaching tunnel's end, Milo brought each hand over and in front of the logs, and he shifted his weight into his hips and heels. Della

dismounted off her steed the way that all cowgirl princesses do.

“Della, why don’t you run ahead and groom the rest of the horses? I’ll be right there.”

Della scurried off to the stables.

Milo lifted his gaze and the first thing he saw as he looked up from the fireplace was the river, exactly as he remembered it. The river where he fished as a boy. In the summer, in the spring, in the rain, in the sun. He crawled out of the fireplace with gingerly movements so as to not track in dirt and sand and soot. He tiptoed across the room and stepped through the open door. For a long time, he stood on the deck looking out at the river, both stunned and comforted by the heartbreaking familiarity. Nothing had changed.

He peeled off his boots and socks, unbuttoned and shimmed off his pants, shook everything out over the water, and then laid it all out on the railing. In his shirt and boxers, he shuffled into the kitchen like he’d done a million times before. Milo swung open the fridge door and welcomed the chill blast. Right face. He pivoted, gripped the top of the door with both hands and rested his forehead against the butter compartment. He had forgotten what it was like to not be hot.

A lawnmower started up nearby. *Dad must be home early*, Milo thought before straightening up and grabbing the turkey and the mayo. After making his sandwich and brushing the crumbs into the sink, he made his way out to his old fishing spot. He could hardly remember a day growing up when he didn’t come to this spot and see if the fish were biting. He rarely caught anything, but that wasn’t the point. His favorite part of fishing wasn’t fishing. It was eating turkey with mayo on white bread, looking out at the

river, thinking of nothing. Absolutely, blissfully nothing.

He sat at the end of the dock, biting his turkey sandwich before casting a worm sandwich to the fish. Milo listened to the trickle of water over rock as he glided his legs through the water, kicking them back and forth in a slow motion, rivery samba.

At times, the sun smeared its golden paint across Milo's eyes, blinding him. When he wiped the paint away from his lids, Milo's hands felt softer, smaller. When he went to kick up an arc of water, his foot completely missed the water. He looked down and saw his feet dangling over the dock, his toes just grazing the water's surface. Learning back onto one hand, he twisted around and reached for his Wakeman rod. Running parallel to the slim, green fishing pole was a slim, olively forearm. He balanced the rod on his lap and ran uncalloused hands over unhaired arms.

Overcome with a surge of energy, Milo tossed the pole aside. He crouched down, gripped dock's end and sprang off in a pointed dive, dipping through golden rays of suspended sunshine and a thousand rippled shades of blue, emerging a deeper shade of olive. Everything glistened through hazel geode eyes, as the dirt brown of his eyes washed away to reveal flecks of jade. The black maples and river birches hovered over the water's edge, hesitant to jump in, burning with leaf flames of the brightest green. His nose just above the water, Milo inhaled until his lungs could inhale no more, then he exhaled. The happy, hollow tapping of a woodpecker was the last thing he heard before he sunk into the river's silence. The first thing he heard when he emerged was splashing. The second was laughter.

The scene was enclosed in a glowing sphere. Joy and water splashed against its crystal walls. It filled with the high-pitched echo of laughter that always seems to

accompany childhood memories. The colored laughter of joy. Laughter can lose its color over the years, and it often retains only its sound in adulthood. But childhood laughter, childhood laughter shines a million colors. You can see it.

His laughter and their laughter and his splashes and their splashes swirled around faster and faster until they fused with a blast of light and silence, shattering the sphere.

Milo pressed himself up onto the dock with two rough-skinned hands, and then he turned to face the water. It was still. No splashes, no ripples. He scanned the water, searching for signs of life. His eyes slid back and forth, left and right, as he unconsciously rubbed the hair on his forearms.

No survivors, thought Milo as he collapsed back onto the deck, the sun-soaked wood warming his arms, his back, his legs. He looked at the sun through shut eyes. A shadow soon came over his face. He opened his eyes.

“Hi, Della.”

“Whatcha doin’?”

“Drying off.”

“Can I dry off with you?”

“You’re not wet.”

“So?”

“Well, you have to be wet to get dry.”

The shadow left his face, blinding him. He heard a few retreating footsteps, silence, an inhaling gasping noise, then a splash. The shadow returned and dripped over Milo’s face. Della’s head was soaked.

“How about now?”

Milo patted the wood next to him with one hand as the other wiped Della's droplets from his eyes. She laid down next to her brother, her spine over his wet handprint. Milo, feeling her stare, turned and looked at her through one squinted eye. Della did the same.

The memory or the moment or both was painfully vivid.

She wiggled her heels as she talked, the tips of her cowboy boots making a tapping sound that seemed far too loud. It didn't make sense.

"Swear you won't be a different Milo when you come back, 'kay?"

Her tiny voice swirled around the dock like a rope, each word flying into the sky, dipping into the water, going under the dock, and then emerging to wrap around his chest and tie him to the wood. He gave staccatoed exhales after every wordly synch.

"You'll still be my buddy and you'll still come to my tea parties and we'll play and do the things we've always done. And you'll still be my Mannerly Milo, right?"

The rope tightened. He was beginning to lose feeling in his hands.

"And you'll say things like: 'My you look lovely,' and 'do be a dear a pass the cookies' and 'you are a sight for sore eyes.'"

Just like he'd done a thousand times.

"You promise, Milo? You promise, don't you?"

His cheek was not tethered down by this magical word rope, but by Della's gaze. He wished he didn't have to look at her. He wished his other cheek was pressed against the dock. He wished humans were capable of promises.

"I swear," he said.

"I swear," he lied.

Everything will change.

“Nothing will change,” he said.

“Nothing will changed,” he lied.

He wondered if lying to an angel makes you the devil, if it makes the whole damn thing go to hell. He wondered if people are good and kind and selfless, or if those are only the things we want to be, or maybe only the things we *say* we want to be. He wondered if people can change, and if they can, if that was good, and if they can't, if that was bad. He wondered if he had a choice, if he had to lie or if he could have told the truth. He wondered if the tenderest of hearts, even his own, would fall apart if not for the twine of well-intended lies. And he wondered what it was about looking right into Della's eyes that made him wonder so much.

As he reached over to scratch his left wrist, he found that his hands were free. The knot was undone. He carefully stood up, shimmied out of the rope which landed at his feet with a lazy thump. Milo stepped over the rope heap and looked down at Della— he the shadow this time. She was asleep. He bent down to pick her up, but something told him that he shouldn't. Something told him he should leave her there, sleeping, by the river. So there Della remained, sleeping, by the river, as Milo strode back to the house, away from the river, in a dry white t-shirt, under the setting sun.

Before sliding open the glass door, Milo scratched his feet against the coir mat. It tickled and hurt all at the same time. Milo looked down, past his boxers, his quads, his clammy toes, and stared at nothing. Milo felt the sun on his neck and turned around to face it, catching a glimpse of his uniform before the sun smudged his eyes with golden paint once more. He took a few steps into the golden light and pulled on his pants and

socks and boots in this brilliant blindness. The sun bled into the river and everything shone in olive. It dried up into a puddle that scaled Milo's boot and landed with a splatting sigh on his pants. With a sharp turn, Milo stepped over the threshold and walked to the fireplace with even, measured steps. About face. One hand on the mantle guiding him, he crouched down and retreated into the fireplace with waddling steps. He sat there, crouching, looking at the river the way you do when you have a question but don't know where or how to begin.

He turned slowly, on the balls of his feet, and peered down the long tunnel of his journey. Milo took one final look back at the river and saw that someone had refilled the water. It was exactly as he had remembered. With that, he began his journey back.

After he crawled for a while, he heard a phone ring the same electronic ring of the corded home phone of his youth. He heard his father answer the phone.

"Glavan residence."

As Milo turned a corner, a muffled voice came in through the tunnel walls. Milo sat up on his heels, stretched his arms out so they touched either side and moved his hands clockwise and counterclockwise. His father's voice came in clearer.

"Hello?"

Usually Della answers the phone, eager to talk to whoever is on the other end, but she was fast asleep on the dock. The raspy voice of this 'hello' belonged to his father.

Milo heard another voice respond and he returned to all fours in search of the body of this voice. He soon realized the voice belonged to his body. He found himself giving responses to his father before even thinking them up. He heard himself and his father give a stiff exchange of pleasantries, of 'how are you's without either party caring

to hear the answer. At one point, Milo brought a hand to his mouth and moved his fingers over his chapped lips. Yes, he was talking. These words, they were his. He crawled on hands and knees as his lips spoke to his father.

Somewhere along the course of the conversation, Milo lied that his deployment wasn't too bad and truthed that "the food served at the mess hall is shitty" and that "some of the higher-ups have no idea what the fuck is going on." Mr. Glavan didn't hear of the poor food selection or the incapable commanding officers, nor of the heartsickness of his son. Mr. Glavan heard only the profanity.

"Milo Barnes Glavan, language! Have your six months abroad completely erased 18 years of diligent parenting? Profanity is unacceptable." The words seeped through the walls.

Milo didn't trust himself to speak. *War*, he thought, *is profane*.

"You think my language is the profane? What's profane is the reality I wake up and live each day out here," Milo growled at the dirt floor. His father didn't hear, and Milo's lack of an audible response only drove his father on.

The words of his father repelled off of his mind like water beading off of his uniform. He didn't have the energy to listen or to remember.

"...Unacceptable. Every since you left it's like you've forgotten all the good breeding and manners that your mother and I instilled in you. I mean, listen to you, you're swearing like a sailor."

Crack.

Milo looked around for a face to yell at, but all that laid ahead and behind him was miles of tunnel. He looked at the space between his hands and with his nail, he

etched an oval. That would do. His eyes narrowed then flashed as he stared at the dirt face.

“Wake up, wake up, wake up,” he shouted, slapping his father’s dirt cheeks. “I’m in the *Navy* for God’s sake. War, like many other things, makes you uncomfortable, so you pretend it doesn’t exist. Well, I wanted to serve my country, so that’s why I’m here in this hellhole.”

Except in that moment, he wasn’t quite sure where he was and it scared him. He made as if to resume his crawling, but he wasn’t finished. Not yet. He turned back to the dirt face.

“You and Mom are reserved, but the rest of the world sure as hell isn’t. Sometimes it goes crazy, and someone has to do something about it. We can’t all shelter ourselves. Where the hell do you think I have been for the last six months? Lounging around in some goddam hotel with room service?”

“Milo—”

“I put my ass on the line so ignorant, foolish folks like you can take your freedom for granted! Do you know what I do?”

The dirt face didn’t respond. It couldn’t respond, it didn’t have a mouth, so in fairness, and with an angry thumbstroke, Milo gave it one. Still, it remained mute.

“This may be called the Sandbox but it’s no goddamn playground. It’s tough work, brutal. GM3. Two letters and a number. Probably doesn’t mean anything to you. But it should. Those two letters and a number make me responsible for all of the ammunition and all of the operation of the weapons at Dwyer—you know, that hotel they’ve been putting me up at. Twenty-two years old, and in charge of the very things

that will kill some.” He added with a whisper, “And save others.”

He hovered over the face, waiting for a response, for anything. He shut his eyes for a moment and when he opened them, two small dark mud eyes were looking at him. They looked sorry. Milo let out a cough, pretending to clear his throat. The dirt face of Mr. Glavan did the same. Milo waited for the small dirt cloud to disperse. Finally, it spoke.

“Listen, Milo. I’m tired and it’s getting late here.” But with each word, the voice got quieter as it returned to the walls. Milo followed the voice with his eyes. When he looked back down at his hands, the face was gone. The voice had returned to the walls.

“Just don’t forget where you come from and the people at home who love you. Alright? Bye, son.”

Click.

“Roger,” Milo replied to an uncaring dial tone. He looked up and found himself staring at his bed framed by the tunnel’s circular end. He looked down and found a muddy ground beneath him marked with a few scattered puddles. Milo leaned back on the balls of his feet and turned his palms up skyward, if the sky was even still there. He looked like he was the middle of a silent, muddy prayer. His knees pressed into the wet earth in an equally muddy genuflection. He could have been thinking about why people die or why people fight or why we have so many damn questions. He could have been thinking about how amazing it is how dirt becomes mud like how bread becomes toast or if anyone has ever put mud on toast before.

Milo wiped his maybe praying palms on the ceiling of the tunnel— tiger stripes of brown against a dry dirt canvas. He steadied his hands on the lip of the base of the

opening, pushed off and landed with an inaudible *thump*. Looking around, the place looked different, dyed a peculiar color. The color of yesterday turning into tomorrow. The color of Morning scattering her darkest lavender buds across Night's black skies, and an unknown hand smearing the darkness with this lavender bud paint.

Milo plopped onto his rack, leaving circular tracks as he crawled across the mattress to grab his favorite book. Normally the indigo of early morning would have been too dark for Milo to read, but during his time at Dwyer he learned to accept and adjust to darkness.

He brought three books to base: the family Bible, Della's favorite picture book, *The Giving Tree*, and Tim O'Brien's *The Things They Carried*. The Bible was his bible of peace and comfort, and *The Things They Carried* was his bible of war and reality. All of the frustrations and feelings that O'Brien felt in 'Nam, Milo felt here in Afghanistan. It was just so refreshing for someone to get it. God, it felt so good for someone to get it. There wasn't a thought that Milo had that Tim didn't have in those short stories.

Milo had marked up the book the way that devout Protestants like his parents annotate the Bible. Passages were highlighted, phrases underlined, pages dog-eared and notes scrawled in the margins. As if on autopilot, Milo absentmindedly thumbed his way to "How to Tell a True War Story." Quickly scanning the page, his eyes landed on the phrase he felt, the sentiment he shared: "If you don't care for obscenity, you don't care for the truth; if you don't care for the truth, watch how you vote. Send guys to war, they come home talking dirty." As he stared at these words, Milo did not hear the steady dripping of water. He did not hear the tunnel open its mouth. He did not hear the river crawl towards him, just as he crawled to her. He heard nothing, only the words.

He underlined the already underlined text and starred it. His parents didn't care for his profanity, didn't care for wartime truth. They only cared for their own truths. Della wouldn't care for his profanity or the truth either. She cared about her big brother, her tea parties, afternoon play dates and imaginary cookies. But she was six. She wasn't *supposed* to care.

After rereading the passage a few more times, Milo closed the book. As he threw the book on the chair by his bed, a loose page gave him a paper cut on his pinky.

A single, rounded drop of blood sat upon his finger. Milo sucked on the cut. Slipping underneath his covers and pulling up his sheets with his free hand, Milo rested his head on his flat pillow, shut his heavy eyes, and dreamed of pinkies, promises and blood.

As he drifted away, his sleep-curved hand draped over the bed, and his thumb grazed the river's surface. Still asleep, he gave a quick inhale as his spine arched away from a coolness beneath him. His back wet, but no longer sweaty. Milo untucked his other hand from his pillow and swirled his hand under his back with a grace that he did not have.

Rocks. He felt rocks. Thick, calloused rocks. Heavy, smooth rocks. Ribbed, knobby rocks. All etched with lines that he could not read. He arched his back a little more and held a chosen rock in his palm. It was surprisingly light, and become lighter with time. Everything did. He exhaled the past and inhaled a memory or a dream or mirage. He remembered lying at the river's bottom, on top of igneous rocks, once sweltering in the molten heat of thousands of degrees, now calm under a cold current that rushes on and on and on. His mind and body gave a shutter of recognition as he

remembered how the bed of rocks had risen up just below the river's surface.

There Milo laid, on a floating bed of rocks suspended in cool sapphire waters as the current continued to rush around him, within him. The rocks gently shifted and clacked beneath him as the river spoke the words of a gurgling brook. The river and the rocks moved along with the same pulsing beats, gentling rocking Milo to an aquatic lullaby. A wisp of a breath escaped from plum lips and it tumbled into the heel of Milo's hand and blew open his clenched fist. A blooming water lily. One finger petal with a single red dot unfolded entirely and arched its back to touch the water. The river ran over and under Milo's hand, and it stayed there, his chest its own pulsing river.

Into the morning, the river sang her lullaby and held Milo's hand. True to its promise, the sun began to rise again as he always does. Feeling a familiar, rayed warmth on the back of his hand, Milo slowly curled his fingers in, wrapping them around the river's finger. After so much had been asked of him, he asked something of the river. He did not use words, but he certainly asked for something. He asked for the river to wash over his mind, eyes, ears and tongue. She shook her head, opened his palm once more, and then ribboned herself around his pinky, washing away the dried blood.

The river of Milo's breath, of his chest, became slow, steady. As he neared the end of his sleep, the water began to flow back into the tunnel.

"Well if you can't do anything, can't wash away everything, can you at least just stay?" He spoke without looking at her. "Please," he whispered. "Don't go. Don't leave."

But the river looked at him with her ageless wisdom, with eyes that wordlessly responded. That told him that rivers cannot stay still. That they have to flow. That she couldn't stay with Milo, not fully. The water level was decreasing steadily as the river

returned home. But as the water inhaled and continued to sink lower and lower, a little bit of it, the watery ribbon curled around Milo's pinky, did not descend. Rather, it swirled around his finger, up his forearm and bicep, spilled into his collarbone, then cascaded into his heart.

This water wasn't exactly as he had remembered—it had picked up sand and dust along the way. But he knew that the sand and dust would sink to the bottom, and when he would touch the water above, he would be touching the same water he did years ago, just with different hands. Hearing a rustle of sheets from a nearby rack, Milo turned over onto this other side and tucked his hand between rib and mattress—feeling that little bit of the river pulse, and thinking that perhaps, maybe, a little bit is enough.